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## THE STATE OF AFFAIRS AT POST ST. VINCENT, SUMMER, 1786

As the summer of 1786 approached, conditions in the northwest were gradually drifting toward an outbreak of the Indian tribes against the American garrison at Post St. Vincent. By the treaties negotiated with the Wyandots, Delawares, Chippewa, Ottawa, and Shawnee in 1785 and 1786, certain tribes, notably the Wabash, Miami, and Piankeshaw, were not included. The growing unfriendliness of these tribes toward the Americans was the result of a smoldering discontent due to an accumulation of irritating circumstances. The French cherished a grievance, less fancied than real, against the Americans for appropriating without adequate compensation supplies for the army; and this state of discontent tended to cement the bond between the French and their traditional friends and allies, the Indians. Moreover, the continued occupation by the British of Detroit and other military posts in the northwest in violation of the explicit terms of the treaty of peace, in itself was a source of bitter feeling on the border; and this bitterness was increased by the unavoidable conviction that these British garrisons were secretly, yet actively, inciting the Indians to unfriendly, even hostile, acts against the Americans.

When matters had reached this critical pass, the opinion along the border crystallized in favor of General George Rogers Clark as the man best fitted to take command. Indeed, Clark was in close touch with the situation, and realized to the full the dangers to the settlements both in Kentucky and in the northwest. In April, 1786, Colonel William Christian, the brother-in-law of Governor Patrick Henry of Virginia, had been killed on Beargrass by a small party of marauding Indians. This incident well exhibited the dangerous condition of affairs along the border.<sup>1</sup> In a letter to Henry, written in May, 1786, Clark significantly says: "The loss of Colonel Christian, whom the inhabitants had great future hopes in, hath caused general uneasiness; add to this the certainty of a war already commenced and early this spring declared by the Wabash Indians in general, amounting in the whole, to upwards of fifteen hundred warriors,

<sup>1</sup> T. W. Bullitt, *My life at Oxmoon* (1911); Lewis Collins, *History of Kentucky; revised, enlarged three-fold and brought down to the year 1874 by his son Richard H. Collins* (Louisville, 1877), 2: 127.

encouraged by the British traders from Detroit, and their own inclination. When you take a view of our situation, circumstanced as we are, no prospect of support, at best, for several months, so formidable and bloody an enemy to encounter, much irregularity in the country—no power to order the militia out of the state for its protection, and before the assembly meets, or any assistance can be got from congress on your making application to them for it, I doubt great part of these beautiful settlements will be laid waste, without protected by volunteers penetrating into the heart of the enemy's country. Nothing else will do. . . Was a sufficient force to appear in their country, after a general action, which I think should take place, they would sue for peace, and agree to any terms you please, to save their country from total destruction. . . A few days ago, an engagement happened near St. Vincents, on the Wabash, in which twelve of the Indians lay (dead) on the field and a number wounded.”<sup>2</sup>

In a letter to Governor Patrick Henry, in July of this year, John May, for whom both Maysville and Mayslick in Kentucky were named, describes in general terms the conditions prevailing at Post St. Vincent: “The Americans living there have been very much distressed by the Indians ever since last winter, and have every reason to believe that they were encouraged to continue hostilities by the French inhabitants who have not only refused the Americans any assistance, but would not suffer them to make use of the cannon, which were left there for their defense, at a fort which they were obliged to build; and when they, the French, were written to on the subject by General Clark, they returned for answer that they had nothing to do with the United States, but considered themselves as British subjects and should obey no other power.”<sup>3</sup>

It seems that no precise account of happenings at Post St. Vincent in July, 1786, has hitherto been given in print. In his letter to Henry, quoted from above, after attributing the blame for prevailing conditions to the British occupancy of the north-

<sup>2</sup> William H. English, *Conquest of the country northwest of the river Ohio, 1778-83, and life of General George Rogers Clark* (Indianapolis, 1896), 2: 797.

<sup>3</sup> William W. Henry, *Patrick Henry: life, correspondence and speeches* (New York, 1891), 3: 369. For John May, see Collins, *History of Kentucky*, 2: 547, 557, 569-571.

western posts, May continues: "The Americans have been lately attacked by the Indians, but repulsed them, whereupon Colonel Le Gras, or Legrow, for I don't recollect how he spelt his name, issued his proclamation, ordered all the Americans to move away immediately. They are now closely confined within their fort or houses, and have every reason to expect the French will assist the Indians against them, and are under the most dreadful apprehension of being totally cut off." After advertising to the numerous murders committed, and the campaign of "frightfulness" of the Wabash and the Shawnee, who gave no quarter, he remarks: "There are now letters here from Post St. Vincent requesting in the most moving terms that assistance may be sent to the Americans, to enable them to move away, and offering to give up every shilling's worth of property they possess in order to defray the expense of moving them."

A little while ago, among the papers of William Calk, one of the earliest settlers of Kentucky, I encountered a letter which throws considerable light on the alarming situation of the American garrison at Post St. Vincent. This letter to General George Rogers Clark is in the handwriting of William Calk, which is distinctive and unmistakable. William Calk was the leader of the party from Virginia, bound for Kentucky, which united itself to the considerable band led by Colonel Richard Henderson of North Carolina on April 4, 1775, and reached Boonesborough on April 20. The original diary of that journey, in William Calk's handwriting, which I recently examined, is still in the possession of his descendants in Kentucky. It is worthy of note that the "Capt. Patten" twice referred to in the letter to General Clark, printed below, was Captain James Patten, who was among those who remained on Corn island after Clark's departure in 1778; he afterwards received land in Clark's grant for services in the Illinois campaign. English vaguely states that Patten "performed other military services after the close of the Illinois campaign, and is said to have been the first authorized pilot of the falls of the Ohio." Born October 12, 1748, he died December 29, 1815, and his remains lie buried in the old graveyard in Louisville in Jefferson street.<sup>4</sup> The letter printed below

<sup>4</sup> English, *Conquest of the country northwest of the river Ohio*, 1: 145-147, 151, n.; 2: 848.

bears the endorsement in William Calk's handwriting: "A true Copy of M<sup>r</sup> John Smalls letter from the opost to General Clark." The name "Opost" was generally given to Post St. Vincent—notably in Clark's *Memoir*. As throwing some light on the conditions at Post St. Vincent from the French point of view, shortly prior to the date of the events described in Small's letter, printed below, the following brief passage is quoted from a letter of Père P. Gibault, written "At Post Vincennes, June 6, 1786" to the Bishop of Quebec: "I should be well enough pleased with the spiritual condition of the people, were it not for the accursed trade in *eaudevie* which I cannot succeed in uprooting and which obliges me to refuse the sacrament to several for the savages commit horrible disorders when in liquor, especially those of these nations here. We are abandoned to ourselves; there is no justice, or at least there is no authority to see that justice is rendered. M. Le Gras and some of the principal merchants and inhabitants do all in their power to maintain good order, and they succeed tolerably well."<sup>5</sup> John Small's letter to George Rogers Clark follows below:

Post St. Vincenns July 22<sup>d</sup> 1786

D<sup>r</sup> Sir

I once more make bold to lay before your Excellency our situation at this place; We was surrounded in our garrison the 15<sup>th</sup> of this instant by four hundred and fifty savage they made no general attack on us they fired a few Shot at M<sup>r</sup> Sullivans house in the night and a few at the foart next Day but did no damage We wounded three of the Enemy: the french took arms and prevented them from Entring the Village and threatened them if they attacked the foart that they would undoubtedly strike them; and it had very near came to blows between them; the French gave them presents to a very considerable amount to go off which they did but threatens in roasting ear time to pay us an other visit; they killed and destroyed a very considerable number of cattle and hogs the property of both French and Americans and took Several Horses the French sustained far the greatest Damage as they have lost several yoke of oxen they work; as far as I can learn all the Indian tribes in this Quarter is fully bent on war—the last express I sent your Excellency was on their return to this place beat out of their Cannoe by a party of Savages on the Ohio near the falling Spring. they made the best of

<sup>5</sup> Clarence W. Alvord, *Kaskaskia records* (Illinois historical collections, vol. 5—Springfield, 1909), 535, 536.

their way for this place and arrived safe. But did not overtake Cap<sup>t</sup> patten we learn that he defeated a party of peankeshaws on the Seleen killed Seven and wounded four of their principle warriors and is returned back with plunder he took of a very considerable value which is all the account we can give of him — Dear sir I hope you will take us into consideration as it will be impossible for us for us to stand without assistance I am D<sup>r</sup> Sir with due Respect your obedient Humble Servt  
J. S.

ps

Sir the reason why I did not send an Express of sooner to you was on account that we were Surrounded and detained to see the movement of the Enemy likewise waiting for a particular account of Cap<sup>t</sup> patten on his arrival But my grief is that I can give you nither as yet  
A true Coppy of M<sup>r</sup> John Smalls letter from the opost to General Clark

In conclusion, it may be mentioned that at the meeting held at Harrodsburg, on August 2, 1786, which had been provided for at an earlier meeting held at Danville, General Clark was given charge of offensive operations against the Indians. Two expeditions went forth against the Indians—one under Benjamin Logan against the Shawnee, which proved entirely successful; the other and main force under General Clark. The expedition under Clark was a disastrous failure—being abandoned as the result of Clark's inability to suppress widespread insubordination. This incident seems clearly to mark the beginning of Clark's decadence.

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